

Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy: Writing About Paintings

“Painting is an attempt to come to terms with life. There are as many solutions as there are human beings.”

George Tooker (1920-), contemporary American painter

Overview: What are Visual Rhetoric and Visual Literacy?

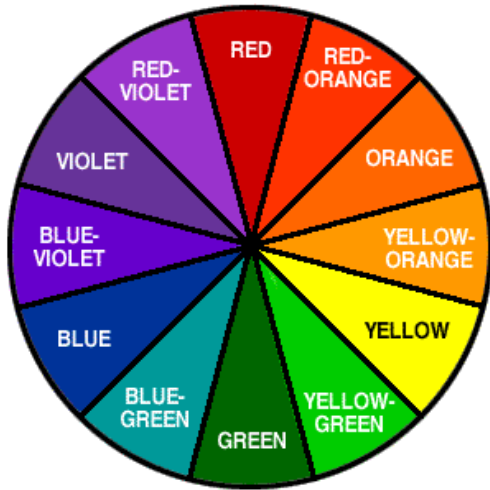
The simplest definition for visual rhetoric is how/why visual images communicate meaning. Note that visual rhetoric is not just about superior design and aesthetics but also about how culture and meaning are reflected, communicated, and altered by images. Visual literacy involves all the processes of knowing and responding to a visual image, as well as all the thought that might go into constructing or manipulating an image.

Introduction to Paintings

Paintings are one of the oldest known human forms of art, with cave paintings dating back to 32,000 B.C.E. Through the use of fingers, brushes, palette knives, and other tools, people have applied paints to surfaces, to decorate and memorialize, to instruct or entertain, to worship or provoke. We’ve all seen paintings over the course of our lives, but writing an academic paper about one (or more) is more active than simply looking. Writing about paintings, as Sylvan Barnet noted, is done “in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is within us.” (Barnet 8)

Trying to figure out how to approach a painting-related writing assignment can seem overwhelming. This handout is meant to point you towards things you can focus on, and various questions you can ask when writing about a painting in order to construct an academic argument in your essay. First, take another look at the painting you’re going to be writing about. Jot down your responses to it, so that you’ll have them when you go to write your paper. Then, consider the following:

- Who is the artist (if known)?
- What is the title of the painting? If a painting is known by several titles, what is the reason for the variety?
- What was the original purpose of the painting?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Where was the painting originally created and located? Where is it now?
- Has it been changed or altered from the original?
- What is the subject of the painting?
- Who or what can we identify in the painting? Where are the subjects located in relation to each other?
- Does the painting (or the artist) belong to any particular school or style?
- Does the painting have any connections with history? (i.e., does it depict a historical event, or have its own history surrounding it?)
- What have previous art historical analyses said about this painting?



Use of Color:

When you are analyzing a painting, one of the first things to look at is the artist's use of color. Do one or two colors predominate? Are the colors bright? Subdued? Light? Dark? One of the most useful tools for analyzing color values is the color wheel. A basic color wheel is shown here. For more information about color wheels, and an introduction to color theory, see Tiger Color's website at:

<http://www.tigercolor.com/color-lab/color-theory/color-theory-intro.htm>

Medium: What material or surface is being painted on?

Almost anything can be painted on. While we might not see much of the actual material or surface behind the paint, knowing what is being painted on is an important part of analyzing the painting. Painting on stone, for example, or creating a fresco using plaster, is different from painting on canvas, parchment, fabric, or wood. Different types of paper absorb paint differently and give the finished painting a different texture.

This Chinese scroll painting was done on silk. How does that choice of medium affect the appearance of the finished painting?



1 Summer Mountains, 11th century. Attributed to Qu Ding. Handscroll; ink and light color on silk; 17 ³/₈ x 46 in. (44.1 x 116.8 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

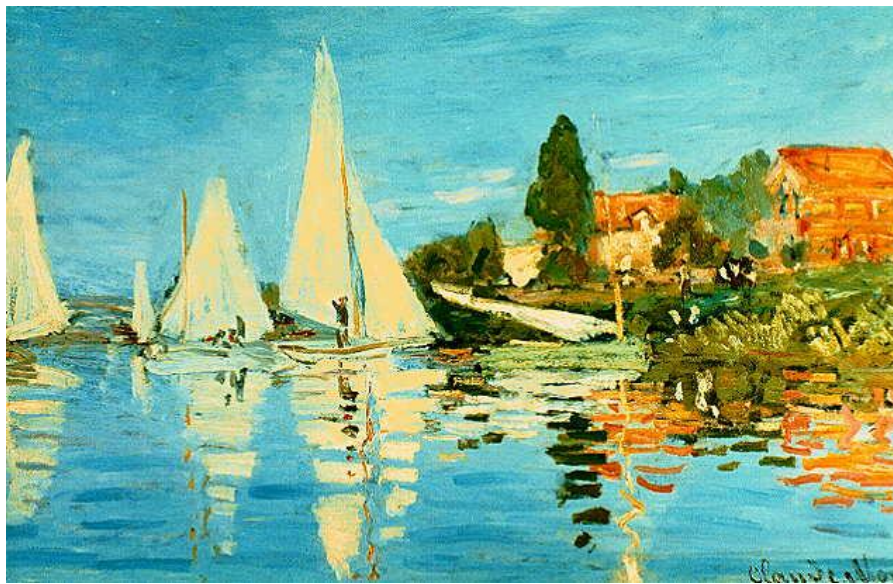
Medium: What kind of paint is being used?

A wide range of paints and inks have been used, individually or in conjunction. Paints have different chemical properties, which means that different paints produce different effects. Acrylic paint, for example, can produce a very glossy, shiny effect, while tempera paint is going to be softer. Paints also vary in thickness, from translucent to so thick that they make a painting three-dimensional. Types of paint include watercolor, oil, acrylic (a modern kind of paint), fresco (used with plaster), lacquer, and tempera.

Technique: Brushstrokes

Brushstrokes are one of the key elements in analyzing a painting. While there are many ways to apply paint or ink to a surface (as anyone who's ever done finger-painting in elementary school, or seen a Jackson Pollock splatter painting, can tell you), the most common way is to use a brush. The amount of paint the artist puts on the brush and the pressure and motion used to apply it to the surface being painted affect the overall appearance of the work. Brushstrokes can be highly individual, and a mark of a particular painter's personal style. Within a specific painting, brushstrokes may be nearly invisible, if a painter wants to achieve a smooth surface, or they can be used to create an effect or add detail.

In this example, by Claude Monet, the brushstrokes are very obvious. What does this contribute to the mood and effect of the painting?



2 *The Regatta at Argenteuil (Régate à Argenteuil)*, 1872. Claude Monet. Oil on canvas; 19 x 29½ in. (48 x 75 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Technique: Line

In addition to brushstrokes, the use of lines is an important factor to consider. Lines can define the edge of a shape or form, but they can also create patterns or an illusion of mass, volume, or movement. Are the lines in your painting sharp or fuzzy? Thick or thin? Do they seem controlled, or spontaneous?

Roy Lichtenstein, known for his use of comic book style in his paintings, often used very defined, dark lines which clearly separated areas of color.



3 *Whaam!*, 1963. Roy Lichtenstein. Oil and acrylic on canvas; 68 x 161 in. (174.7 x 408.4 cm). Tate Modern, London.

Size

The size of a painting can be difficult to evaluate, especially since nowadays we often see paintings only as reproductions, in books or online. However, when analyzing a painting, its size is an important factor to keep in mind. Often, the dimensions of a painting are included in its description. Take a moment to look at the size of the painting, and get a mental image of what those dimensions mean. Is it a miniature? Is it life-sized?



4 *Legend of St. Francis*, late 13th century. Giotto di Bondone. Fresco. Interior, upper church of St. Francis, Assisi.

Here we see Italian Renaissance artist Giotto's frescoed interior for the chapel of St. Francis of Assisi. What is the impact of the size of this painted space on the viewer?

Content: Use of space/perspective

Look at the ways the artist uses space within the painting you're analyzing. Are there clear divisions of space? Where is the main subject in relation to the foreground, background, and middle ground? What is the relationship between the different parts?

The use of perspective varies both historically and culturally. Classical Roman and Greek art, for example, used perspective to appear three-dimensional, while medieval paintings were often two-

dimensional and “flat” in appearance. The rediscovery of perspective in the Renaissance was one of the major shifts in European art. Modern Western art often plays with perspectives, sometimes within the same painting.

Because Western art was focused on realistic, three-dimensional perspective in art for so long, there was a tendency to label art which did not use this type of perspective as primitive or less skilled.

Content: Symbolism

In order to understand the symbolism in a painting, it’s important to learn about the culture and time period that produced it. Andy Warhol’s famous paintings of Campbell’s soup cans would have been incomprehensible in eighteenth-century India, while the complicated religious symbolism of Hindu paintings would baffle most twentieth-century Americans. If you’re writing about a painting, research the historical, cultural, and religious meaning of aspects of the painting. Don’t forget that the same object or color can have widely varying meanings in different times and places.

Painting Types: Portraits

Sylvan Barnet provides the following questions as guidelines for the analysis of portraits:

How much of the figure does the artist show (just the face, or the face and bust, or the full figure)? How much of the available space does the artist cause the figure to occupy?

Does the picture advertise the sitter’s *political* importance, or does it advertise the sitter’s *personal* superiority? What sort of identity is presented—social or psychological? That is, does the image present a strong sense of social station (ruler, soldier, merchant, wife, mother, etc.), or does it present a strong sense of psychology—a sense of an independent inner life?

What do the clothing, furnishings, accessories (swords, dogs, flowers, clocks, etc.), background, angle of the head or posture of the head and body, direction of the gaze, and facial expression contribute to our sense of the figure’s personality (intense, cool, inviting)? Is the sitter portrayed in a studio setting or in his or her own surroundings? If accessories and suggestions of a particular setting are absent, does the absence suggest timelessness—as when, for instance, a saint is depicted against a uniform gold background?

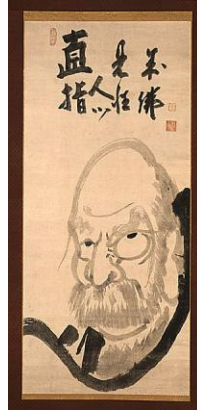
Is the picture largely propaganda for the sitter (as is common in pictures commissioned by sitters or members of their family), or is it largely concerned with the painter’s response to the sitter (as is common since the late nineteenth century, when artists working with dealers had a larger market)?

If *frontal*, does the figure seem to face us as if observing everything before it? If *angled*, does it suggest motion, a figure involved in the social world? If *profile*, is the emphasis decorative or psychological? (Generally speaking, a frontal, or, especially, a three-quarter view lends itself to the rendering of a dynamic personality, perhaps even interacting in an imagined context, whereas a profile is relatively inexpressive and seems apart from any social interaction.)
(Barnet 58)

The following four paintings show the great variety which can exist among portraits. How are these subjects presented? What sorts of social, professional, and personal identities are being displayed? What emotions are being expressed?



5 *Portrait of Mary, Queen of England*, c. 1554. Anthonis Mor van Dashorst. Oil on oak panel; 14 1/5 x 10 in. (36 x 25.2 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



6 *Daruma*, 18th century. Hakuin Ekaku. Hanging scroll; ink on paper; 44 1/2 x 19 3/4 in. (113.03 x 50.17 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.



7 *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. Oil on canvas; 83 x 59 1/2 in (210.8 x 151.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



8 *Madame X*, 1884. John Singer Sargent. Oil on canvas; 234.95 x 109.86 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Painting Types: Landscape

In landscape painting, the focus is on the scenery—trees, rivers, mountains, fields, sky, etc. While there may be people or animals in the picture they are not the main subject.



9 *Wooded Landscape*, 1670s. Jan Wynants. Oil on canvas; 13 x 16 ½ in. (34 x 42 cm). Private Collection.

Both of these paintings can be classified as landscapes, painted in oil on canvas. Looking at them, what differences do you notice? If you were writing about these paintings, what would you say about them? Is nature presented as friendly? Peaceful? Hostile? Is there any human interaction with the land, or any signs of human impact on the environment?



10 *Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico /Out Back of Marie's II*, 1930. Georgia O'Keeffe. Oil on canvas; 24 1/4 x 36 1/4 in. (61.6 x 92 cm). Private collection, on loan to Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

Recommended Resources

Art References

The Art Lexicon

<http://www.artlex.com/>

A very comprehensive, cross-indexed, glossary of art and art history terms, with tons of images.

An Introduction to Color Theory

<http://www.tigercolor.com/color-lab/color-theory/color-theory-intro.htm>

TigerColor, a company that makes color scheme design software, has an excellent guide to all aspects of color theory.

Image Sources

Web Gallery of Art

<http://www.wga.hu/>

A massive collection of art images, including paintings, from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. The Gallery updates fairly regularly, with new images and more information.

Additional Writing Resources Online

Handout from UNC-Chapel Hill's writing program, detailing the five most common types of Art History assignments: <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/arthistory.html>

Dartmouth's guide also contains a link to its Art History Department's glossary of terms:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/arthistory.shtml>

The University of Iowa's guide to writing about art contains a list of very helpful questions to consider when approaching various types of art:

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~writingc/writers/handouts/WritingAboutArt.shtml>

Printed Resources

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2008). This is the most recent edition; earlier editions are also available.

Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2008).

Handouts in the Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series

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